



### **Partecipazione e Conflitto**

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## **BOOK REVIEWS**

**Masooda Bano and Hilary Kalmbach. (eds.), *Women, Leadership, and Mosques: Changes in Contemporary Islamic Authority*, Leiden and Boston (Mass.), Brill, 2012, pp. xvii, 581.**

By assessing a wide range of cases studies, *Women, Leadership, and Mosques* edited by Hilary Kalmbach and Masooda Bano successfully contributed in casting light on a recent topic in gender and religious studies: the evolution of female authority in Islam. More in detail, the peculiarity of this work consists in an inductive analysis of the increasing presence of women in madrasah and mosques; going beyond a mere historical or theological perspective, the volume is a systematic and punctual consideration of different aspects of female authority and women's religious engagement in Islamic societies.

The focus of the research as Hilary Kalmbach states in the introduction is "analyzing the dynamics governing the construction and the exercise of female Islamic authority in mosque and madrasah space"; through the concepts of Islamic authority, legitimacy and knowledge, the book is succeeding in addressing women's growing involvement in religious knowledge and texts' interpretations.

Furthermore, the approach chosen by the authors is fruitful: two of the most debated issues in modern Islamic societies, religious authority (and its maintenance) and the position of women, are here analyzed besides the literature on women and religion as well as on "Islamic revival", the resurgence of Islamic practices in the everyday.

This is the case of scholars as Mernissi, Kandiyoti, Wadud, Moghadam, Badran and Pepicelli who have evaluated women's religious participation and access to religious knowledge using the controversial frame of Muslim Feminism. According to this approach, the "tradition of misogyny" in Islam descends from a male partial view of culture and society then legitimized by sacred texts. The grassroots women's involvement in "gendering" religious domain should thus be associated with a call for female access to knowledge and legitimate institutions.

Considering women engagement in Islamist movements, the literature on “Islamic revival” - also called “piety movement” - has focused on the everyday religious practices performed in the public sphere. This Islamization process, commonly described as a “bottom-up” one, consists mainly in an individual attention to praying as a pillar of a more complex *pious* behavior; this individual pattern should however be related to an external struggle for the creation of a public Islamized space. In this way of resistance daily embodied by subjects' practices, the role of women should thus be reconsidered: women's place should not necessary be home, rather, by maintaining a separation of sexes in public, women should be in the condition to perform these practices as much as men.

Moreover, there is another aspect that comes out: the “institutionalization” of female religious engagement. As for the Egyptian case studied by Saba Mahmood, women engaged in following Muslim principles of *da'wa* (piety) are replying not only to a “religious” frame: there is an intertwined role that secular and religious institutions have played in the articulation of women's piety movement.

In the wake of this perspective, by presenting heterogeneous ways of performing authority, the volume points out how women with specialized religious education managed to access some career paths and public spaces that have long been open only to male scholars.

By focusing on authority, *Women, Leadership, and Mosques* deals with the increasing space gained by women in the religious realm. In particular, the study moves from the consideration that, unlike female leadership in the case of Sufi orders or Islamic movements, few researches have been devoted to the growing acceptance of women within religious official institutions and mosques. The valuable contribution of this volume is thus the idea that authority is a key concept for the study of religion; who has the right to interpret religious texts and applying them to the lives of the followers is in fact endowed with both legitimacy and authoritative relationships.

However, such a leadership often goes beyond religious sphere, entering those of political, economical and social activities. In the case of Islam, Hilary Kalmbach's analysis stresses on the “fragmentation” of leadership and the heterogeneous approach to religious texts; moving from Weber's definition of legitimacy and the distinction between power and authority, authoritative relationship actively involves followers who recognize the legitimacy of the leader. Along these lines, Islamic authority entails an authoritative relationship based on the acquisition of specialized Islamic knowledge, both theoretical and practical. Exploring the case of female leadership in many Muslim communities is fascinating: on one side women have not had a significative presence in mosques, their authority being generally associated to religious teaching; on the other side, this role does not mean that women have been excluded from the transmission and the application of Islamic knowledge: their presence in *hadith* transmission, among the Companions of the Prophet as well as scholars and instructors is historically dated. All these examples have just been important references for the XX and XXI century expansion of female Islamic leadership. Women gained more and more space in the mosques, teaching and leading prayers for other women and (re)establishing forms of leadership in religious public spaces.

With the aim to describe what does it mean to exercise a female religious authority within religious institutions historically male-dominated, the book meets the following questions: how this authority has evolved? Has it been generated by women engagement? By the state or religious male-dominated institutions' "kind permission"? And moreover, which are the effects of a female access to religious sacred texts and authority in Muslim societies?

All the twenty case-studies of the volume deal more or less explicitly with these questions, assessing female Islamic authority in countries where the population is majority Muslim (Morocco, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Egypt, Indonesia), as well as where Islam is a religious minority (Germany, Sweden and North America). The cases are articulated in a three sections structure: the first one focuses on the creation of spaces for the exercise of women's religious authority and the relative role of the state, the male intervention and the female initiative in engendering it. The second section is devoted to female engagement in constructing places and strategies of authority; asking how women consolidated their religious authorities. The third section assesses the impact of female religious authority on Muslim women: to what extent female authority is exerted to reinterpret texts, to reorganize gendered spaces or to ask for new roles for Muslim women?

Furthermore, the authors pointed out the necessity of a methodology able to provide research materials within a wide framework. The choice of combining ethnography with textual approaches is thus successful in bridging disciplines: Gender Studies, Islamic Studies, Political Sciences, Anthropology, Sociology and Religious Studies all provide elements enriching the research.

There is then one aspect that we would like to add *à guise de* open question: besides the notion of authority, it could be interesting to analyze the monopoly of religious knowledge, that is, more in detail, how far the state or religious institutions' monopoly on religious officials, in particular in the case of female preachers, has evolved?

Enhancing the debate on this topic, the authors produced an outstanding book, a landmark in the field proving the full scope of contemporary female Islamic leadership. A volume that most assuredly is going to direct future researches.

(Chiara Maritato, *University of Turin*)